

# A Narrative on Calligraphy by Sun Guoting

Revised and Enhanced Edition

英譯書譜  
增訂版

KS Vincent POON (潘君尚)  
BSc, CMF, BEd, MSc

Kwok Kin POON (潘國鍵)  
BA, DipEd, MA, MPhil, MEd, PhD



*First Edition*  
*March 2019*

*Published by*  
*The SenSeis 尚尚齋*  
*Toronto*  
*Canada*

*www.thesenseis.com*  
*publishing@thesenseis.com*

ISBN 978-1-989485-10-1

All Rights Reserved  
© 2019 The SenSeis

In Loving Memory of Our Beloved

**Pui Luen Nora TSANG**(曾佩鑾)

永和九年歲在癸丑暮春之初會  
于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩契事  
也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地  
有峻<sup>崇山</sup>領茂林脩竹又有清流激  
湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水  
列坐其次雖無絲竹管弦之  
盛一觴一詠亦足以暢叙幽情  
是日也天朗氣清惠風和暢仰  
觀宇宙之大俯察品類之盛  
所以遊目騁懷足以極視聽之  
娛信可樂也夫人之相與俯仰

一世或取諸懷抱悟言一室之內  
或因寄所託放浪形骸之外雖  
趣舍萬殊靜躁不同當其欣  
於所遇暫得於己快然自足不  
知老之將至及其所之既倦情  
隨事遷感慨係之矣向之所  
欣俛仰之間以為陳迹猶不  
能不以之興懷况脩短隨化終  
期於盡古人云死生亦大矣豈  
不痛哉每覽昔人興感之由  
若合一契未嘗不臨文嗟悼不

A portion of KS Vincent Poon's model of Wang Xizhi's (王羲之)  
*Lanting Xu* (蘭亭帖)  
Semi-cursive script (行書)

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....5

## **PART ONE:**

### **English Translation of *A Narrative on Calligraphy (Shu Pu)***

Paragraph 1: On the Four Meritorious Calligraphers of the Han and Jin dynasties as well as the nature of unadorned simplicity and refined elegance in the art of calligraphy .....9

Paragraph 2: On basic scribing techniques and their essential elements and properties ..... 15

Paragraph 3: On the applications of the art of calligraphy ..... 19

Paragraph 4: On the flaws commonly seen in learning calligraphy during the Eastern Jin and the Southern dynasties ..... 21

Paragraph 5: On the various scripts in calligraphy ..... 23

Paragraph 6: On specialization of one particular script, adeptness in scribing both standard and cursive scripts, as well as personal temperament ..... 26

Paragraph 7: The impact of the environment, conditions, and circumstances on scribing calligraphy as well as the inadequacies in narrating the art ..... 28

Paragraph 8: On the principles in deciding the topics and materials to be included in Shu Pu as well as limiting the scope of it to the period between the Eastern Han and Southern dynasties..... 31

Paragraph 9: On holding and moving the brush ..... 37

Paragraph 10: Brief discussion on the exemplary masterpieces scribed by Wang Xizhi (王羲之)..... 39

Paragraph 11: The art of calligraphy is evolved from one's mindset and emotions, holding one's original nature in the highest regard ..... 41

Paragraph 12: On the overall structures and layouts in the art of calligraphy ..... 43

Paragraph 13: The three stages in learning calligraphy - the proper and balanced stage, the daring and risky stage, and the thoroughly comprehended and harmonized stage .....	45
Paragraph 14: Common missteps and misconceptions in learning calligraphy (in Sun Guoting’s times) .....	47
Paragraph 15: The important aspects that learners should pay attention to .....	48
Paragraph 16: On the speeds of moving the brush - “Slow and Heavy”, “Strong and Swift”, and “Stay and Hold” .....	50
Paragraph 17: On “Bones”, “Tendons”, and “Flesh” .....	52
Paragraph 18: Overall discussion on the ultimate path in pursuing the art of calligraphy - reverting back to one’s true nature and conforming to the laws of the Natural Universe .....	55
Paragraph 19: Comprehending and Not Comprehending .....	58
Paragraph 20: Conclusion - the reason behind naming this document as “Shu Pu (A Narrative on Calligraphy)” .....	62

**PART TWO:**  
**Footnotes and Bibliography**

Footnotes .....	67
Bibliography .....	141

**PART THREE:**  
**Modelling of A Narrative on Calligraphy**

Modelling of <i>A Narrative on Calligraphy</i> by KS Vincent Poon .....	144
---	-----

## Introduction

(I)

*A Narrative on Calligraphy* (書譜, pronounced as Shu Pu) was written in 687AD by the renowned Tang dynasty calligrapher Sun Guoting (孫過庭, or Sun Qianli 孫虔禮) of the seventh century and is regarded to be one of the most important narratives in studying the art of Chinese calligraphy. The Chinese title, 書譜, is translated into English by others as *Treatise on Calligraphy*<sup>i</sup> or *Manual of Calligraphy*<sup>ii</sup>, yet “Treatise” or “Manual” is far less accurate than “Narrative” in translating the word “譜” in this context, as both words do not bear the meaning of “recording and narrating”.<sup>iii</sup>

The presumable original masterpiece of *A Narrative on Calligraphy* can be observed in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan. However, whether this is a partial, complete, or simply the preamble of Sun Guoting’s *A Narrative on Calligraphy* is still in question.<sup>iv</sup>

(II)

Aside from its aesthetic beauty, *A Narrative on Calligraphy* is an early document that analyzes and details the art of Chinese calligraphy in a relatively more systematic manner. Hence, its textual content is often considered to be an important resource for studying and understanding Chinese calligraphy. Drawing from traditional Chinese values and philosophies, Sun Guoting provided a narrative that outlined the aesthetics and techniques in calligraphy as well as his deliberation on the importance of one’s temperaments/conducts in writing good calligraphy. Therefore, it

is a must-read for anyone who is interested in studying Chinese calligraphy or traditional Chinese culture.

(III)

This book is the revised edition of my 2018 book of the same title and delivers an even more precise translation with 20 titled thematic paragraphs that is based on Kwok Kin POON's *The Vernacular Chinese Translation of Sun Guoting's A Narrative on Calligraphy* (孫過庭書譜白話對譯. Toronto: The SenSeis, Feb. 2019).

This book has three parts. Part one is the annotated line-by-line English translation of the original text. Part two highlights the translation's explanatory footnotes that are written by referencing numerous historical texts; these footnotes not only include in-depth elaborations, but also illustrate the many fundamental misinterpretations made in the translations by Chang Ch'ung-ho & Hans H. Frankel<sup>v</sup> and Pietro De Laurentis<sup>vi</sup>. Finally, part three is a model (臨寫) of *A Narrative on Calligraphy* scribed by myself.

It is our sincere hope that this book can help readers to achieve a more in-depth, correct, and clear understanding of Sun Guoting's philosophies towards Chinese calligraphy.

KS Vincent POON

March 2019

---

i. Chang Ch'ung-ho & Hans H. Frankel, *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995.

ii. Pietro De Laurentis, *The Manual of Calligraphy by Sun Guoting of the Tang*. Napoli: Universita degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", 2011.

iii. The word "譜" in *Kangxi Dictionary* (《康熙字典》) is defined as "籍錄也(to record and narrate)".

iv. 啟功《孫過庭書譜考》。《啟功叢稿》北京：中華書局，1999，pp.105-108。

v. Chang Ch'ung-ho & Hans H. Frankel, *ibid*.

vi. Pietro De Laurentis, *ibid*.